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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL

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INFO RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC 0686

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RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 4294

RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 3363

RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE

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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS KABUL 003019

DEPT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/RA, AND SCA/A

DEPT PASS AID/ANE

DEPT PASS USTR FOR GERBER AND KLEIN

DEPT PASS OPIC FOR ZAHNISER

DEPT PASS TDA FOR STEIN AND GREENIP

USOECI FOR ENERGY ATTACHE

CENTCOM FOR CSTC-A

NSC FOR JWOOD

TREASURY FOR LMCDONALD, ABAUKOL, BDAHL, AND MNUGENT

OSD FOR SHIVERS

COMMERCE FOR DEES, CHOPPIN, AND FONOVICH

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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TAGS: FAIR ECON AF

SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN'S HAJ FLIGHT WOES PERSIST

REF: KABUL 2977

¶11. (SBU) The difficulties in airlifting Afghan Haj pilgrims to Saudi Arabia that led to the dismissal of the last Transport Minister (reftel) are continuing. More than a week after Haj flights were to have begun, only about 900 of the 30,000 Afghans who have paid to make the Haj have actually taken flights to Saudi Arabia. The few flights that have occurred have been wet-lease contracts arranged by the state-owned Afghan carrier Ariana Airlines with a Turkish carrier. But since Ariana is officially banned by Saudi authorities from flying to Saudi Arabia, it is unclear if even these wet-lease flights can continue.

¶12. (SBU) The Afghan government has signed a new contract with a Saudi-Swiss charter carrier, but this airline has not been able to provide the promised number of flights, in part because of higher insurance costs and complicated underwriting standards associated with flights to Afghanistan. Some of the flights the Saudi-Swiss contractor are to provide would be sub-contracted to a second Turkish charter carrier, but its flights have been delayed reportedly because of issues related to the Turkish civil aviation authority. FM Spanta had to step away from a meeting today with the Ambassador to address the issue. Embassies Kabul and Warsaw subsequently assisted Spanta and the MFA to place a call to Turkish FM Babacan, who was in Warsaw. Kabul's FAA Rep also continues to provide direct assistance to the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation in resolving technical issues. AmConsul Jeddah has also helped resolve issues with landing slots on the Saudi end. Commercial issues between the Afghan government and its contractors present higher hurdles, and the USG has limited ability to influence these.

¶13. (SBU) Meanwhile, thousands of would-be Hajis day after day await

news of when they will fly. Hundreds have been told to gather at a mosque in downtown Kabul in preparation for departure. They wait in reportedly squalid conditions and are becoming angrier each day that the promised Haj flights do not occur. Demonstrations against the government's handling of the Haj flights have already taken place, and the possibility of further social unrest cannot be ruled out.

WOOD